

**A COUNTRY TOO FAR:
U.S. MILITARY OPERATIONS IN SOMALIA, 1992-1994**

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How far is the United States willing to go in order to feed and police the world? One answer to that question came from American military experience in Somalia between 1992 and 1994. In those three years, the United States embarked on no less than four major operations in Somalia, and the ultimate result was failure. The U.S. military experience in Somalia taught lessons that might be applied to today's occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Since the beginning of the Cold War, the United States had committed military forces when needed all over the free world, sometimes in response to natural disasters, but often also in an attempt to prevent friendly governments from falling to communist forces. Sometimes the policy succeeded, as in South Korea in the early 1950s, and sometimes it failed, as in Vietnam in the 1960s and early 1970s. By 1992, however, the Cold War was over. The Soviet Union had split into fifteen parts, and other former communist countries such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia were also breaking up. International Communism seemed to have evaporated as a threat. U.S. President George H. W. Bush, aware that U.S. military forces were shrinking, could have reduced U.S. military commitments abroad. Instead, he increased them. In 1991, for example, the United States led an international coalition to drive Iraqi military forces out of Kuwait, which they had invaded and occupied the previous year. The President called for a "new world order", a post-Cold War world in which the United States, as the only surviving

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superpower, would be the beneficent leader, working with the United Nations to aid the victims of natural and political disasters all over the world. In 1992, America's armed forces took part in no less than twelve major humanitarian operations across the globe.¹

One of those places was Somalia. By 1990, the government of long-time dictator Siad Barre collapsed, and a new government formed under Ali Mahdi in 1991 was torn apart by the campaigns of a number of clan-based militia factions. The most powerful of these was led by Mohammed Farah Aidid. By 1992, anarchy and civil war had produced massive starvation in Somalia. An estimated fourth of all children under five had starved. Up to 350,000 people had died from lack of food. As many as 80,000 people fled to neighboring countries such as Kenya and Ethiopia. On April 27, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 751, creating the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM). Press reports dramatized the food shortages, persuading developed countries to ship food to the port of Mogadishu, the nation's capital. Conflict among rival clans in the city prevented the safe docking and unloading of ships. The UN Security Council passed another resolution, number 794, which asked members to furnish combat troops to help in the food distribution. In July 1992, the United Nations sent Pakistani forces to Somalia to monitor a tenuous ceasefire, but the fighting continued to endanger food deliveries.²

President Bush responded with Operation Provide Relief, which began on August 14. The Pentagon organized a Central Command Joint Task Force under U.S. Marine Corps Brig. Gen. Frank Lubutti, with forces from all the services.

Provide Relief promised to deliver massive quantities of food and other relief supplies, not only by ship but also by airplane. Large four-engine jet C-141 cargo airplanes transported food from the continental United States and Europe via Egypt to Kenya, where it was stockpiled at airfields at Mombasa and Wajir. Trees along the runway at Wajr had to be cut down to make way for the C-141s. The large aircraft, nicknamed “Starlifters”, did not attempt to land at smaller airfields within Somalia.³

The United States used smaller C-130 turboprop transports to airlift the food from Kenya into Somalia, landing in such places as Belen Huen, Baidoa, Bardera, Oddur, and Beladweyne. Each C-130 “Hercules” carried from 10 to 15 tons per flight. Cargo included rice, sorghum, wheat, flour, cooking oil, bottled water, beans, peas, and salt. Many of the Somalian airfields lacked paved runways, and the gravel destroyed many an airplane tire. Sporadic fighting in the vicinity of some of the airfields persuaded pilots to keep their engines running while their aircraft were unloaded. That way they could take off quickly should ground fire erupt.⁴

By the end of 1992, Provide Relief flights had delivered more than 38 million pounds of food to Kenya and Somalia. Cargo ships delivered even more food to the ports of Mombasa and Mogadishu. But despite the enormous amounts of food arriving in Somalia from Kenya and overseas, the most vulnerable famine victims remained hungry. Marauding armed gangs from rival clans raided warehouses and convoys, stealing the food for themselves and fellow fighters. At times, the gangs demanded “protection payments” from relief workers. In September 1992 additional Pakistani troops arrived in Somalia via a U.S. airlift called Operation

Impressive Lift, but they were unable to stop the theft and violence in Mogadishu and surrounding areas.⁵

Although President Bush was not reelected in November of 1992, in December he decided to launch a new military operation in Somalia called Restore Hope. Its purpose was to insure a more fair distribution of the food delivered by the continuing Operation Provide Relief. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Colin Powell, following former Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger's advice on foreign involvement, urged President Bush to use overwhelming force with a clearly stated purpose and exit strategy. USMC Lt. Gen. Robert B. Johnston commanded Operation Restore Hope, which included forces from 23 nations. Eventually 32,000 U.S. and foreign troops took part in the operation. U.S. Ambassador to Somalia Robert B. Oakley negotiated with rival clan leaders and secured their cooperation. When U.S. forces entered Somalia in force on the beaches of Mogadishu in the pre-dawn hours of December 9, they were greeted by an army of press photographers, but they encountered no hostile fire.⁶

Large C-5 and C-141 four-jet transports moved most of the initial 32,000 tons of Restore Hope cargo. They carried equipment and supplies from the United States to Somalia, staging at bases in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Yemen, and Djibouti, and refueling over the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Red Sea. KC-10 aircraft, normally used as tankers, also transported Restore Hope cargo. The U.S. transports landed at Mogadishu, Baledogle, and Kusmayu. Most of the Restore Hope troops arrived in Mogadishu by commercial airliners contracted

by the United States. Eventually sealift passed airlift in terms of tonnage of Restore Hope cargo delivered to Mogadishu.⁷

C-130s continued to carry food and other supplies from Kenya into Somalia as part of the former humanitarian operation. The two operations, Provide Relief and Restore Hope, proceeded simultaneously from early December 1992 to the end of February, 1993, one to deliver food, and the other to insure its fair distribution. When Operation Provide Relief ended in February 1993, almost 2,000 flights had delivered more than 23,000 tons of relief cargo to Somali famine victims in Kenya and Somalia, and ships had delivered even more. Operation Restore Hope continued into the first week in May, ending on the 4th. By then it seemed that the food had reached the people who needed it most. The humanitarian crisis seemed over, and the United States turned over responsibility for food deliveries in Somalia to the United Nations. President Bill Clinton withdrew most U.S. troops. Less than 5,000 of the more than 25,000 U.S. troops who had deployed to Somalia for Operation Restore Hope remained after May.⁸

In the subsequent Operation Continue Hope, the United Nations rather than the United States played the leading role. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a native of Egypt, steered a new course toward “nation building” in Somalia, challenging the power of the native warlords whose fighting had produced the food shortages in the first place. At the same time that the number of U.S. troops in Somalia was cut 80 percent, they were expected to assume a more active and aggressive role in determining the political leadership of the country. In this case, doing more with less proved to be a disaster.⁹

On June 5, 1993, UN troops attempted to shut down Aidid's radio station. Forces defending the station left two-dozen Pakistani soldiers dead. UN forces in Somalia launched a five-month military campaign against Aidid. U.S. Army General Thomas Montgomery, who led U.S. troops in Somalia, requested armored vehicles and AC-130 gunships to give his men more security and offensive capability. Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, wishing to avoid escalation of U.S. commitments in Somalia, refused to send the weapons.¹⁰

U.S. forces attempting to arrest leaders of Aidid's faction in central Mogadishu encountered unexpectedly heavy resistance on October 3. Enemy-fired rocket-propelled grenades took down two troop-laden Black Hawk helicopters, isolating U.S. troops behind enemy lines in central Mogadishu. In the furious firefight that followed, Somali gunmen killed 18 American troops, dragging some of the bodies through the streets in ghoulish celebration. Some 84 wounded U.S. troops made it back to friendly territory after the use of more helicopters and the advance of a ground column. Although many times more Somalis than Americans lost their lives that day, the battle appeared to have been an American defeat. Aidid and his leaders remained at large.¹¹

The terrible urban battle, the largest since Vietnam, convinced President Clinton to change U.S. policy and launch a fourth and final military operation in Somalia called Restore Hope II. He authorized a temporary increase of U.S. forces and weapons in Somalia, not to capture Aidid, but to protect U.S. bases, keep roads, ports, and communication lines open, and most importantly assure the safe withdrawal of all U.S. forces from the country by the end of March 1994. In mid-

October, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution in support of President Clinton's new policy, and suggested that funding for further operations in Somalia after March 31 would not be available.¹²

The President chose to airlift most of the deploying additional forces to Somalia because he wanted rapid projection. Huge USAF C-5 cargo airplanes transported most of the 1,700 deploying troops and 3,100 tons of cargo directly from Hunter Army Airfield near Fort Stewart, Georgia, and Griffiss Air Force Base near Fort Drum, New York. Only the C-5s were large enough to airlift the 18 heavy tanks and 44 Bradley armored vehicles that were sent. The nonstop flights from the United States to Somalia took some 18 hours, with four refuelings from KC-135 and KC-10 tankers over the western Atlantic Ocean, the eastern Atlantic, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Red Sea. Aging USAF C-141 transports also took part in the airlift, transporting troops and smaller cargo loads, but they could not be used as much because many of them had developed wing cracks. The USAF also contracted successfully for commercial airliners to take up the slack. As the operation continued, sealift eventually surpassed airlift in the delivery of munitions to U.S. forces in Somalia, using the port of Mogadishu. Ships also transported some of the additional troops deployed.¹³

USAF AC-130 gunships and their crews also deployed to east Africa. They operated from Mombasa, Kenya, not far from the Somali border. They stood ready to launch missions over Somalia should they be needed to protect U.S. forces there. Each AC-130 could fill a football-field size area with bullets in a matter of seconds if necessary.¹⁴

If safe withdrawal were the goal, Operation Restore Hope II succeeded. Airlift and sealift removed U.S. troops from Somalia between the end of 1993 and the end of March 1994. In the end, U.S. forces returned to the United States, as they had from Vietnam, in apparent defeat.¹⁵

Contributing to the decision to withdraw U.S. forces from Somalia were military commitments in other parts of the world, especially in the Balkans and over northern and southern Iraq. In 1992, the United States launched Operation Provide Promise in order to deliver food and other relief supplies to the people of Sarajevo and other parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina in the midst of a civil war during the long break-up of Yugoslavia. In April 1993, the United States embarked on another operation in the same country, Operation Deny Flight, to prevent Serb aircraft from taking part in the civil war. United States involvement in the Balkans was increasing rather than decreasing. At the same time, the United States enforced no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq in order to prevent Saddam Hussein from attacking the Kurds within his own country and the Kuwaitis just to the south. The operations over Iraq in the period between 1992 and 1994 were called Operations Provide Comfort, and Southern Watch. The United States was more committed to the crises in the Balkans and in Iraq than to the troubles in Somalia.¹⁶

What were some of the lessons learned from the U.S. military experience in Somalia in the 1992-1994 period? I want to suggest a few. Every operation is subject to what can be called “mission creep”. What began as a humanitarian operation evolved into a nation-building enterprise. There are limits to the ability of the United States, even as an agent of the United Nations, to determine the political

structures of other countries, particularly in those parts of the world where language and religious differences nourish anti-western sentiments. The United States cannot resolve every crisis in the world because its limited military forces, despite their high quality, cannot be heavily involved in too many countries at the same time. Significant percentages of foreign populations might even prefer their own warlords or dictators to the presence of foreign military troops, especially if those troops come from a nation whose culture is very different from their own. A nation should not attempt to increase its political influence in a place where it has reduced its military presence. In other words, in a military sense, it is sometimes foolhardy to attempt to do more with less. A final lesson is that perhaps the United States should act less as an agent of the United Nations and more as its own.¹⁷

In the final analysis, U.S. military intervention in Somalia must be rated a qualified failure. Operation Provide Relief in conjunction with Operation Restore Hope combined to feed enormous numbers of starving Somalis, but Operation Continue Hope and Restore Hope II failed to end the rival clan conflicts in Somalia that produced the humanitarian crisis in the first place. In the end, the United States left Somalia to stew in its own juices, looking to other areas where its interests were more clearly at stake. Where the United States went, the United Nations followed. A year after U.S. forces left Somalia, the remainder of UN forces also departed. A few months later, the United Somali Congress replaced Aidid as chairman with Osman Hasan Ali Atto. Aidid raised another militia, and the civil war continued.¹⁸

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